

Sports for IDPs

Through sports, children and youth can become sensitive to others need and values, learn to handle exclusion and dominance, manage their emotions and learn self control

By Aamir Bilal

In scorching heat, violence-stricken children, females and elders were standing in long queues waiting to receive aid items sent by various organisations and philanthropists. This is a usual scene at the designated relief camps of Kacha Gari, Jalozei, Benazir and Sheikh Shahzad at Peshawar, Swabi, Mardan, Nowshehra and Risalpur districts.

According to UNHCR estimates, there are more than 1.3 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in the relief camps. The majority comprises of children, youth and women who are traumatised by the ongoing conflict between Taliban and armed forces in FATA and other areas of NWFP. This is one of the largest internal displacements in the world history that has occurred because of conflict situation and has brought radical changes in the landscape of humanitarian assistance to follow.



This unique occurrence may force the foreign aid agencies and government to modify their ways to address the post conflict situation in the area. One of these major changes is a moment away from exclusively material form of intervention to now a heavier focus on public health programs, part of which includes mental health care of the victims.

Undoubtedly the main focus of any early emergency intervention in a conflict or disaster relief is to offer food, shelter, clothing, medical aid and family re-unification. In the early stages of an emergency, when the assessment and establishment of response needs are still being completed, the quick re-establishment of simple cultural activities like sports, play areas and religious practices in the affected community can make a significant and quick contribution in the stabilisation of the situation.

While staring at the wide stretched camps of Benazir and Jalozei where white canvas tents were pitched like coffins, the flashback of famous Sabra and Shatila camps came to my mind where Palestinian civilians were massacred ruthlessly during Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. President Yasir Arafat than frequently visited the camps and used to play table tennis with the youth in camps. The media spoke out against the practice as it was at that time not an approved and established activity to address trauma through sport. Arafat responded to the media outburst by stating a historic statement that "if the Palestinian youth are not taken out of the trauma by employing all possible means including sport these camps will become their psychological burial grounds". The statement stood the test of time and Palestinian youth came out even stronger from Sabra and Shatela.

Since 1982 the situation has changed rapidly and a lot of research has gone in the area of using sport as an affective tool in addressing post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The research has now proved that sport has a crucial role in the optimal growth, learning and development of children from infancy through adolescence. It addresses the development of

children at physical, cognitive, emotional and social levels that is very much required in our complex society marked by stress and terror.

Through sports, children and youth can become sensitive to others need and values, learn to handle exclusion and dominance, manage their emotions, and learn self control. Plus share power, space and ideas with others. Psychologists believes that play is also necessary for assisting children to master emotional traumas and disturbances.

The NWFP government has taken an initiative under the livelihood development project in FATA to establish a sports program and use sports as a tool for education and social development. However, the implementing body must remember the complexity of the subject before its initiation as it's not a usual sport programme where couples of cricket or football matches are organised to attract media and donor attention without a sustainable outcome.

It is a well known fact that children particularly adolescents need role models in form of coaches and elders from within the society and camps that we desperately lack. These coaches provide structured opportunities to actively help and give back to their community through assisting and supporting the community's children and youth in these activities which also help these coaches to address their own unresolved trauma. It would thus be wise to first study the best practices in this complicated area before using sport in conflict, disaster and post conflict scenarios. The sport projects of Iran, Columbia, the Beslan in North Ossetia and post-tsunami projects in Sri Lanka, Ethiopia, Uganda and Sera Leon could provide guidance to newly-conceived sport initiative as in FATA.

The FATA sport department may or may not have the capacity and expertise to carry out this humongous task in given security situation at scale, yet it would not be difficult to incubate a proto type sport related program for the IDPs of Swat, Buner and Dir districts, learn from its out come, refine and than proceed further.

The NWFP government may like to approach UNESCO for the relief and assistance in sports for IDPs project as UNESCO besides education is bound to help and assist sport programs under article 1 of the international charter of physical education and sport. Its "Sport in a box" program is an excellent intervention that includes several types of balls, skipping ropes, whistle and scoring slates to organise and play verity of sport in a confined environment.

Pakistan is one of the biggest sports goods exporters in the world. Like UNESCO the sport goods exporters in Pakistan should also realise their corporate social responsibility and come forward to help the suffering youth of FATA and NWFP by not only donating relief items but also sports gear that can be utilised for launching sport programs for internally displaced children and youth in the designated relief camps.

It is, however, recommended that the true effectiveness of using sport as an intervention to help children to overcome suffering and disaster is not only in competition but in cooperation, not in winning or losing but in process of participating in a supportive group. The executing agency should also be mindful of the selection of sports and games to be played in camps under the watchful eyes of coaches and sport psychologists to achieve the necessary outcome, other wise the effort will perish like a blind following a blind.

In the absence of formal school structure in the relief camps, sports, recreation and play can provide a way to educate children during and after the conflict, helping youth to heal

and make a new start in life. This activity would help in rehabilitation of traumatised children and help them to reintegrate into society by developing the community spirit.

The successful initiation of a well thought out sport programme would certainly attract the donor support and this could well be a turning point in the history of Pakistan sport that is surrounded by the clouds of distress, misfortune and uncertainty.

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